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ABSTRACT

Designed for high school students interested in careers in special education and related services, this leaflet discusses the role of an educational diagnostician. It describes the education and personal qualities required to become an educational diagnostician, the job outlook and advancement for a career as an educational diagnostician, and career preparation. An educational diagnostician is described as having an ability to assess and diagnose the learning problems of students, usually as part of a multidisciplinary team. They use their particular skills and areas of expertise to help make the best decisions for placing student with learning problems. They also act as key support personnel who counsel the children and consult with teachers, parents, and others on the child's progress. The exact functions of an educational diagnostician vary from state to state, as do requirements for the job. Most states that use educational diagnosticians require a master's degree for licensure and some also require several years of teaching experience. A profile of an educational diagnostician is provided to illustrate the challenges and benefits of the job. (CR)

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ED 420 971

CAREERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES

Educational Diagnostician

David, a 3rd-grade student, is a slow reader. His parents are worried about his ability to keep up with his classmates. Ms. Thomas, a middle school teacher, needs information on what changes should be made in her classroom to accommodate a new student with learning disabilities. Susan, a high school student, has a history of failure. She needs to be evaluated to determine her academic strengths and weaknesses. These students, teachers, and parents need the services of an educational diagnostician. An educational diagnostician usually works with the students first in a testing capacity, then helps with any modifications that may help the student and the teacher, and finally in a service capacity as the job and student require.

The role of the educational diagnostician can vary between states and even between school districts. And even the title by which these professionals are known is often different. Depending on the state's certification, this education professional may be called a learning disabilities teacher consultant or a learning consultant. Regardless of their title, educational diagnosticians share an ability to assess and diagnose the learning problems of students. They are usually part of a multidisciplinary team, that is, professionals from several different backgrounds who utilize their particular skills and areas of expertise to make the best decisions for placing students with learning problems. Frequently, they are also key support personnel who counsel the children and consult with teachers, parents, and others on the child's progress.

Nature of Work

The exact functions of an educational diagnostician vary. Typically, this professional is part of a team who assess a student, plan an appropriate program for that student, and monitor the program and the student's progress. This team could include an educational diagnostician, school psychologist, school social worker, and other professionals. Each person would have different responsibilities as part of the assessment team. For example, the educational diagnostician might assess a student's academic ability, personality and behavior factors, and the student's ability to process information. The school social worker could prepare a social and developmental history of the student. The school psychologist could assess the student's intellectual ability, learning aptitudes, and personality and emotional development. If necessary, more testing might be done using outside professionals such as a child psychiatrist or neurologist. Different states and school districts use different procedures and different terminology, but the process is essentially the same. The use of professionals with different strengths to get a complete picture of the child and the problems confronting that child.

Once the assessment is complete, the team meets to determine if the child is eligible for special services under Title I, special education, or bilingual education programs. After the determination is made, the educational diagnostician, who often serves in a case manager's

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role, meets with the child's teacher and discusses the classification and the best way to teach the student. The team may recommend that the child be allowed extra time during tests or to take them orally if written communication is a problem. Or the diagnostician may discuss with the teacher where to place the child's desk. A highly distractible child may need to be placed directly in front of the teacher if the child has peer interaction problems. Whatever program and or techniques are decided upon, the educational diagnostician in many school districts assumes responsibility for seeing that the program is implemented.

Some states require that the educational diagnostician meet with the teacher of a referred child before any testing is done or before the child study team is convened. The aim is to assist the teacher with any alternative methods or techniques that may help the child so that the problems can be dealt with effectively without necessitating any testing or assessment.

When educational diagnosticians serve as case managers, their role frequently expands to consulting work. If a child is placed in special education, the educational diagnostician remains involved not just in the yearly meetings to assess the student's progress but also in the testing every 3 years that is required by federal regulations. Plus, as overseer of the child's program, the educational diagnostician becomes a valuable resource and ally to the student, the teachers, and the parents.

Education Required

Most states that use educational diagnosticians require a master's degree for licensure. Some also require several years teaching experience, most typically 3 years. The rationale is that an educational diagnostician, who consults with teachers having problems with students, must be aware of the realities of teaching as well as with the intricacies of tests and their proper administration and uses.

Personal Qualities

Educational diagnosticians work with all ages from preschoolers through teenagers, so enjoyment of children is a necessity. In addition, educational diagnosticians need to be careful, logical, and thorough. Because they work in teams and serve as support for teachers, parents, and students, educational diagnosticians also need to enjoy working with people and have good communication skills. They must be able to lead and resolve conflicts when they arise, whether between a student and a teacher, a parent and an agency representative, or within the team.

It is an interesting, challenging career for those who like the scientific side to testing but still wish to remain involved with young people and their education.

Job Outlook and Advancement

The job outlook for a career as an educational diagnostician is quite good. The heavy demands on teachers, both in general education and in special education, mean that the role of the educational diagnostician is likely to expand. Also, the increasing number of students each year who experience learning problems and thus need assessment and testing makes the educational diagnostician a key player in education's team approach to assessment and diagnosis.

Once a child has been assessed and placed, collaboration between players continues to be of paramount importance in education. The child, the family, and the professionals all have their roles and responsibilities in improving educational outcomes for the student. The educational diagnostician is an integral player who shepherds the child through the process and acts as a liaison between the different groups. This role is likely to continue to increase both in numbers needed and in importance.

Advancement is possible through supervisory and administrative positions, although it may mean giving up the day-to-day contact with the students.

PRACTITIONER PROFILE

Missi Allen
Educational Diagnostician
Denton, Texas

Missi Allen is a site-based educational diagnostician at a high school in Denton, Texas. Missi begins her day at 7:30 a.m. and ends it long after 4:00. She juggles varying priorities. She meets one-on-one with students, participates in team meetings of professionals on pupil placement, answers teachers' questions about what to do with a child having academic or behavioral problems in the classroom, tests students to ascertain the exact nature of their difficulties, helps them with scheduling and other problems, and talks on the phone to everyone involved with her students, from the parents to agency personnel to prospective employers.

As a high school student, Missi became involved in the home economics program and decided to pursue a career in education. After receiving her bachelor's degree in vocational home economics education, she began her professional career as a general education teacher. Over the last 6 years, Missi has also received two master's degrees—in family studies and in educational diagnostics supervision. She also has a midmanagement certificate and is in the final stages of her doctorate in special education focusing on at-risk populations. She switched from general education to special education because, although she enjoyed all her students, she felt drawn to the students with disabilities and those at risk for academic problems and dropping out.

Despite her hectic schedule as an educational diagnostician, Missi finds it rewarding and stimulating. She is working with the at-risk kids she enjoys and advancing their education on multiple fronts. As a site-based educational diagnostician, Missi maintains contact with the students throughout their high school careers. She works closely with the school psychologist; they even have adjoining offices in the Denton High School's counseling center. The school psychologist will assess a student from the behavioral and psychological perspectives while Missi's testing focuses on education and achievement issues. This way, Missi feels, they have a complete picture of the student from which to make a careful diagnosis and to recommend a placement decision.

However, in Missi's case and in that of most educational diagnosticians, testing is just the beginning of her involvement with her students. She serves as advocate, mediator, advisor, and all-around supporter. She keeps a professional eye on their academic program, their career goals, and their behavioral and psychological makeup.

Missi is also there when parents, teachers, and mental health and other public agency personnel have questions about a student or the program. She acts as a buffer between contentious forces and as a resource for parents and teachers seeking to brainstorm about how to handle a problem. Sometimes Missi's job is simply redirecting people, putting the right person in touch with the corresponding right person. "I have to fight my tendency to take on the world and remember that the mental health agent really needs to talk directly to the teacher or vice versa."

Because of the overlap between them, Missi, the school counselors, and the school psychologist meet on a monthly basis to ensure that together this team of professionals is building a consistent program for the students.

Missi finds her greatest challenge to be dealing with the lack of consistency in special education regulations. Federal and state legislation are subject to almost yearly changes and the regulations drawn from that legislation, Missi feels, can change even more frequently.

Rewards from her job come in all shapes and sizes. Missi feels you are in the right place at the right time when:

- You assess a 16-year-old who has met with repeated failures, some academic and some social, and you can show him that

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"No, you are not dumb or stupid. You have areas of weaknesses but so does everybody else and you have areas of strength, too. I'll help you work with your strong areas to overcome the weak ones. You can be successful."

- You can explain to parents that their daughter "is not rebelling when she only does two of the four things you tell her to do. In fact, she is not an auditory person but a visual one. Write down the five things, and she can refer back to the list and get all five done."
- One of your students wants to be a doctor but you know that her mental disability would prevent her from making it through medical school. However, after you persuade her to volunteer in a doctor's office, she discovers that she loves being a doctor's assistant and makes that her career goal.

Rewards come too from the professional relationships that are so necessary in today's collaborative education world. "Even as a general education teacher, I realized the rewards of working together with other professionals."

"Seeing the kids succeed is what it's all about and it takes a team effort to raise the rate of success."

How to Prepare for a Career

Students considering a career as an educational diagnostician should seriously consider volunteer work to give them experience with people and children with disabilities. Organizations such as the Association for Retarded Citizens, National Easter Seal Society, and Special Olympics welcome volunteers. Sometimes special education programs use student volunteers as tutors, mentors, or "buddies."

Resource Information

Council for Educational Diagnostic Services
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1589
703-620-3660

The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1598
1-800-641-7824
E-mail: ncpse@cec.sped.org
URL: http://www.cec.sped.org/ncpse.htm

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